

## A Lazy Sunday at the Hot Corner...Again

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, March 20 2011 8:12 AM - Last Updated Sunday, March 20 2011 9:09 AM

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The Madness of March is upon us and while I'm not going to be the guy to tell you that I had Richmond in the Sweet 16 (even if I just did, a move prompted by watching them thump my beloved Dayton Flyers in the A-10 Championship), no sports fan worth his salt can say that this isn't the most enjoyable time of the year for sports. We all stay up late, watching teams that we've never seen or cared about before – but find ourselves cheering for because we picked them in a bracket – while spending our weekends teaching our 4-year-olds why a young man goes by the name “Jimmer”.

Obviously, I'm not immune to this Madness and given that The DiaBride's family hails from The Cream City, I spent my Friday night at The Q cheering on MY Marquette Warriors (and yes, I'm aware that some refer to them as “Golden Eagles”) against the hated Xavier Musketeers (hey, I'm a UD grad...what do you expect) after battling through what was probably the largest non-St. Paddy's Day or Opening Day crowd I've ever seen in downtown Cleveland. Speaking of Opening Day, we now sit less than two weeks away from the beginning of April and the beginning of the Tribe season and with that, let's get loose on a Lazy Sunday...

The news of the week broke yesterday afternoon and it obviously concerns the never-ending soap opera that is 3B as a CT scan revealed a small crack in the bone of Jason Donald's left hand, which will sideline him past Opening Day with the [current plans putting him in rehab games in “early April”](#)

And like sands through the hourglass...

Though this obviously represents a tough break (pun intended) for Donald, who was thought to have a few months at 3B to himself, the conversation turns (once again) to the Opening Day 3B...just when that topic was supposed to have been put to bed. While that “Opening Day 3B” designation is largely a symbolic one (as Donald's injury could only sideline him until mid-April or so, until you consider that this is the Indians), the options that seem to be there in Donald's place comes down to Jack Hannahan and Luis Valbuena. I'm not counting Sonny Nix

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because...well, because he's not a good 3B and has been playing 2B all Spring and I'm not including The Chiz because...well, I'll get to that.

That said, if the legitimate options are Louie the Fifth and Hannahan, it's actually more than possible that the Indians could carry both IF out of Goodyear with Valbuena's ability to play multiple positions around the infield making him better suited to fill the utility role, one he may be filling for the majority of the year for the Tribe. If that's the case with Valbuena as the Futility IF, that leaves us with Jack Hannahan and while the comparison has been made (poorly) that Jack Hannahan may be another Casey Blake, let's not get ahead of ourselves here and realize that Hannahan, who is now 31, has posted these two lines at the two highest levels of competition:

### **Hannahan – MLB**

.224 BA / .311 OBP / .347 SLG in 981 PA in 290 games

### **Hannahan – AAA**

.269 BA / .370 OBP / .412 SLG in 1,660 PA in 405 games

For a point of reference, when Casey Blake debuted with the Indians in 2003, he had accumulated these lines as a 29-year-old looking to break in with the Tribe:

### **Blake – MLB**

.232 BA / .304 OBP / .339 SLG in 125 PA in 49 games

### **Blake – AAA**

.290 BA / .373 OBP / .482 SLG in 1,880 PA in 440 games



Wait, you say...those MLB numbers look similar.

Well yes, until you see that Hannahan has put up those lines over 290 MLB games and Blake's came in only 49 MLB games. The other BIG difference between the two comes in their AAA SLG as Blake had shown power in AAA (65 HR in 440 games) whereas Hannahan (37 career AAA HR in 405 games there) simply has not. If Blake was a surprise at the plate in 2003 (and thereafter), his AAA numbers showed that he had the ability to hit (particularly with some power), even if he hadn't had the chance to show it in MLB on an extended basis. Hannahan, on the other hand, has had extensive opportunities in MLB to hold down a 3B job and simply hasn't as his offensive numbers simply haven't justified his inclusion in an everyday lineup.

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That's not to say that Hannahan is worthless as his glove has always been his calling card. Since defensive metrics (UZR, Zone Rating, dWAR) are still a work in progress and usually contradict each other, I'm not going to assert any measure of Hannahan's ability in the field by citing those. Rather, I'll point out that in the two seasons in which he was a full-time 3B for the Athletics, [he was rated as the 4th best fielding 3B by John Dewan's Fielding Bible voting in 2008, following that up with an 8th place finish in 2009](#).

Not bad, right?

Now remember how the Indians have a bunch of groundball pitchers with more coming and how the Tribe's infield defense last years was positively abysmal?

Well, if we're talking about a stop-gap to await the return for the previously thought-of "stop-gap" at 3B (Donald), the Indians should go with Hannahan out of the gate and hope that Donald's hand heals quickly which would allow them to get back to the original infield alignment that was assumed when Spring Training started.

Already I can hear it – really, Jack Hannahan?

Not sure if you've heard about this guy that was tearing up the Cactus League...plays 3B, known simply as The Chiz?

Yes, I'm aware of The Chiz, but [the argument from this space last weekend still holds true](#) (despite the now-embarrassing level of attempted controversy by the city's only remaining paper in terms of rabble-rousing on this Chisenhall thing), and it's worth inserting

[this piece from MLB Trade Rumors](#)

on this whole delaying FA thing just to get the facts straight and to provide some MLB context: *The best recent example of a possible intentional free agency postponement is the Rays' Evan Longoria, who started the '08 season at Triple-A and spent 13 days there before making his big league debut. He ended up accruing 170 days of service time in '08, two days short of a full year. Rays players were unhappy when Longoria was reassigned, but executive vice president Andrew Friedman said service time considerations were "virtually irrelevant" in their decision because the Rays expected to sign the third baseman long-term.*

--snip--

*The Rays managed to lock Longoria up to an unprecedented contract less than a week after his debut. **But in that contract, 2014 represents his first free agent year, when it would have been 2013 had he broken camp with the team. As it stands, Longoria gave the team club options on three free agent years. Had he been called up a few days earlier, the contract might only allow for options through 2015 instead of '16.***

As a quick aside before getting to the bolded portion, does that quote that "service time considerations were 'virtually irrelevant' in their decision" sound familiar, in terms of what has been coming out of Chris Antonetti's mouth recently with The Chiz talk?

Of course it does, but if you're taking Antonetti at his word on that (or believe what Friedman said about Longoria), then you're not understanding how this thing works. Seriously, what does anyone expect any MLB Front Office to say, given the outrage from the Players Union and even a likely disciplinary action that would ensue if Antonetti came out and explained the player control aspect of the decision with Chisenhall?

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Nevertheless, what's most interesting (other than that this was done by everyone's darling right now in terms of how to run an MLB franchise – the Rays) is that last part which was admittedly bolded by me. Remember that bit last week about the Indians when I wrote that “if his final year of club control is 2017 and the Indians approach Chisenhall at some point in the next couple of years to give him guaranteed money while buying out FA years (as has been their modus operandi), those FA years start a year later and the Indians would be controlling a player like The Chiz even longer into his career”?

Yeah, that...

That being said, this isn't to assert that Lonnie Chisenhall is Evan Longoria because he isn't (and this is [a great read from Tony Lastoria as he relays the views of an opposing scout on The Chiz and MANY others](#) ) and the likelihood of the Indians offering The Chiz “an unprecedented contract” less than a week after his debut is both non-existent and imprudent for the team. While The Chiz's future certainly holds promise, the facts laid out here last week as to why he shouldn't be the Opening Day 3B still hold true, even if it means a few weeks of Jack Hannahan until Jason Donald's hand fully heals.

Yet, despite all of the logic and prudence that may exist with The Chiz not starting the season in Cleveland, don't think that the drumbeat for a highly-touted prospect to be on the Opening Day roster is unique to Cleveland. As [Craig Calcaterra points out at Hardball Talk](#) , it's happening out in San Francisco with Brandon Belt...and that's just one instance that happened to catch my eye.

Of course, that “drumbeat” will only grow stronger as Opening Day approaches and with every PA by Jack Hannahan in April that doesn't result in a base hit. Of course, service time and player control issues aside with The Chiz, [Jordan Bastian nailed The Chiz situation](#) (Donald or no Donald) earlier in the week when he asserted that, “anyone surprised by Chisenhall being cut hasn't been paying attention. You don't make an OD roster with no AAA experience & 27 spring ABs.”

That said, don't mistake this call for The Chiz to start the season in Columbus as justification for keeping Chisenhall down in Columbus into July if he's absolutely crushing the ball while Donald's injury persists. There is a point in the season in which Chisenhall (hopefully) has proven his worth in Columbus (and remember, that's not guaranteed) and the Indians should look at him as their best option for 3B, once service time and performance questions are out of the way.

Prudence and patience are admirable, obstinance is not...

Nevertheless, how this infield situation eventually plays out (and I'm not just talking into this June) is going to be extremely interesting to watch simply because of the sheer volume of legitimate options that seem to exist above the AA level. Earlier in the week, Antonetti was quoted on the infield options, [putting this on the tape recorder](#) :

*“The way we look at it organizationally, it's a good problem to have to have too many quality players, with too few positions. To the extent we can do that consistently, we'll be in a really good place, organizationally. With respect to our Triple-A team and how that plays out, we'll have to take some time in the next few weeks to determine the best alignment of players.”*

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His usage of “the next few weeks” is interesting to me as SO much emphasis is placed on Opening Day lineup/roster, it really pushes the big-picture into the background, as insane as that may sound. By that I mean that Indians’ fans are interested to see who’s playing where at the beginning of April as if it provides some glimpse into the future of the team more than any other point in the season when it does not.

You know what I’m interested to see?

What the infield looks like on the 4th of July or, better yet, at the end of the season, with the players sorting themselves out through their own performance instead of being sorted out by 27 Spring Training AB or projections or crusades in the local media to sell more papers or create controversy when none, in fact, exists. There’s a very real possibility that the infield by the end of the season could be Nick Johnson, Cord Phelps, Asdrubal, and Donald...how’s that sound?

While some of that would be seen as progress for guys like Cord Phelps or Jason Donald, the performances of no less than seven players (LaPorta, Kipnis, Phelps, Valbuena, Cabrera, Donald, and Chisenhall) who legitimately could assert themselves as potential long-term members of the Indians are going to affect what the Indians do in the infield alignment going forward. And you know how many people know how all of this is going to shake out as we sit here in mid-March?

None, as it could be so many different combinations of players (where does Phelps fit, what if Kipnis or The Chiz struggle, who gets hurt) by the end of the season that taking a guess is just throwing darts blindly at the board. Sure, I’d like to sit here and say that LaPorta, Kipnis, Cabrera, and The Chiz will be the infield at the end of the season with Donald and Phelps on the roster, meaning that the best-laid plans have gone off flawlessly, but the reality of MLB is that the only certainty about the future is its uncertainty, particularly with young players.

Some of these guys are going to establish themselves and others are going to fall off the radar, and that process is not just going to happen this year. Back in 2009, Luis Valbuena posted a .714 OPS as a 23-year-old middle infielder with 25 2B in just 103 games; today, Louie the Fifth is relegated to Utility IF or “stopgap” status less than two years later, despite being just turning 25 last November. Anyone want to check where Josh Barfield is these days?

While the Indians may point to an embarrassment of riches in terms of infielders the fact is that not everyone is going to pan out as expected and this injury to Jason Donald (and [here is an absolute must-read from Andrew Humphries at LGT](#) challenging the universally accepted narrative that the Indians were rooked in the CP Lee deal) is just another example of how out-of-control factors play a role in the development of certain players. Maybe Donald’s injury amounts to just a few weeks missed, but he certainly seems to have been walking under ladders with black cats in his path over the last few years.

That said, what the Indians have built up at the higher levels of their organization is finally some depth that allows them to fill their infield with internal options and as memories of Ronnie Belliard playing short RF and Aaron Boone whiffing his way out of Cleveland fill most of our heads, the notion that they could finally be past adding veterans to fill holes in the infield may be coming. While I realize that the previous statement is an odd one to make with The OC

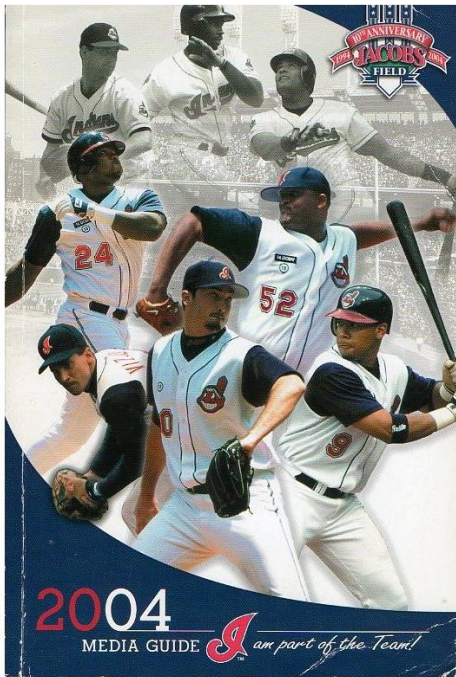
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scheduled to be the Opening Day 2B and with “that pederast” Hannahan looking like the 3B, the idea that the Indians “could finally be past adding veterans to fill holes in the infield” hasn’t arrived just yet.



Sure, it may be coming sometime in July (after Hannahan’s tenure is but a memory and when Uncle Orlando moves on), but the infield depth in the organization is pretty obvious, to the point that they can move onto Plan B or even Plan C at 2B and 3B throughout this season. It’s no secret that the infield has been a major problem for the Indians, but between Phelps, Donald, Kipnis, and The Chiz, they should be able to find a suitable 2B, 3B, and Utility IF (with Valbuena thrown in there as a wild card) for the next five to six years. All of these guys are pretty much slotted in for spots around the infield this year and beyond and, if the “Lesson of the 2004 Media Guide Cover” (with Milt Bradley, Jody Gerut, and Jason Davis) taught us anything, it is to expect the unexpected with a young team. That 2004 team won 80 games with Milt Bradley in LA, with Jody Gerut posting the lowest OPS+ among regulars, and with Jason Davis pitching his way out of the Indians’ plans. What made up for those players’ struggles were contributions coming from what could have been considered unlikely sources when the 2004 season began.

As we sit here in mid-March, attempting to guess which of these players are going to play major roles in the next incarnation of what we hope will be a contending team, what’s past is prologue and there is a great line at the end of what was [a pretty fair overview of the off-season at MLB Trade Rumors](#) that stated that the Indians are “stocked at both the lower and upper levels of the minors” going further to say that, “this is a club that will get better in a hurry, even if 2011 is not the year.”

That may not be music to the ears of Clevelanders staring an NFL lockout in the face and with their NBA team setting records for ineptitude (and caring less while doing it), but pieces should start to emerge in 2011 as they did in 1993 and in 2004. While the emergence of those pieces may not immediately translate to winning, it should get the team closer to that goal. To reach that goal, the Indians need to start drawing some conclusions on their young players – based on

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MLB performance – and the infield situation this season provides a microcosm of the Indians' future in terms of talented youngsters having a shot this season to insert themselves into the team's future plans.

Which youngsters those are however, is anyone's guess...